

Preface

MY IMPULSE TO SEARCH PARABLES of gender in texts from the past was derived, first and foremost, from the need to fill a critical lacuna in the scholarship of medieval Hebrew literature, a field that has so far ignored gender as a critical key for literary inquiry. This urge was fostered by several critical habitats, to all of which I am indebted and to some of which I hope to reciprocally contribute. To feminist medievalists studying other medieval literatures (who might perhaps wonder at the book's belated publication considering the plethora of studies in their respective fields), I offer here completely new materials, most of which have been hitherto closed to non-Hebrew readers. In the context of Jewish studies, my appropriation of feminism to medieval Hebrew texts joins the growing body of gender-and feminist-oriented scholarship in various fields (Bible studies, Talmud and Jewish law, Kabbala, history of Jewish sexuality, history of women and gender relations in Jewish societies, and related fields).¹ The impetus to reformulate Jewish studies in accordance with feminist scholarship verges on the quest of Jewish feminists, thinkers, and activists (especially in the United States, and to a lesser extent in Israel) for new and meaningful paradigms of reintegrating women into living Judaism. My hope is that my work will be of interest to their ongoing discussions.² For my feminist colleagues working in modern Hebrew/Israeli literature, my excursions into the past may offer a more distant historical vantage point from which a broader panorama of Hebrew literature and its gender trouble could be viewed.³

The urge for writing this book, however, was not solely or purely critical. It was equally fostered by the current Israeli context, which has enveloped my growth as a woman, as a critic, and as a feminist—a context in which women's situation (as well as other no less acute political issues) is intricately caught between binding commitments to the Jewish past and the will to change the present and the future. While I cannot delve here into a detailed exposé of gender relations in Israeli society, law, and politics today,⁴ I would like nevertheless to illustrate how Israeli feminists, in their struggle for actual change, are bound to refer back to metaphors from the Jewish past which still govern the symbolic representation of

women. The following two examples demonstrate the positioning of women as outsiders vis-à-vis—and within—Jewish textuality. Both revolve around the metaphor of the women's back gallery in the synagogue and stress the continuities between old and modern forms of women's exclusion.⁵

In a series of essays (1984–89) reflecting on the position of the modern Hebrew woman writer, Amalia Kahana-Carmon, a leading Israeli novelist, compared the realm of Hebrew literature, past and present, to the Jewish synagogue. By that she meant not only that modern secular Hebrew literature has assumed the spiritual and communal functions of the traditional synagogue but also that, much like the space of the synagogue, Hebrew literature has been divided by a gender partition. Even after the advent, a century ago, of women writers into the male sanctuary of Hebrew letters, women continued to be relegated to literature's back gallery. As in the orthodox synagogue (still the mainstream form of worship in modern Israel), a woman cannot take on the task of *sheli'ah tzibbur*, the leader of prayer and the representative of the congregation. She may pray privately from the margin; “She Writes Rather Pleasingly, but on Things Marginal” reads one of Kahana-Carmon's titles in this series. While women were accepted as lyrical “poetesses,” expressing private “gentle” feelings, it was quite impossible for them to act as central figures, the mouthpieces of public and political concerns. The entry of women writers (especially novelists) to the center of the literary scene has been blocked “since men writers and their audience conceive of Hebrew prose fiction, even if it is entirely secular, as the national synagogue of the spirit.”⁶ That the decade that followed this indictment saw an unprecedented flourishing—and acceptance—of women's writing, with women topping each annual best-seller list since 1997, is by no means a proof to Kahana-Carmon's weakness of argument, but the contrary. During the mid-1980s, while her discontent was voiced and heard, a younger generation of women writers, already exposed to the nascent Israeli feminist movement, began to sharpen its pens.

The recent fate of Maurycy Gottlieb's oil painting of the Yom Kippur prayer (1878) provides an equally acute metaphor to the actual problematic state of women's representation. Gottlieb's depiction of the synagogue scene was realistic—men inhabit the front and center (with the young artist standing next to an elderly man embracing the Torah scrolls); the women (including the artist's mother and his fiancée) watch the ceremony from the back gallery, distanced from the Holy Text. In

1978 the Diaspora Museum in Tel Aviv ordered a replica of Gottlieb's painting, from which the women figures would be virtually erased, leaving the back gallery completely void. Myriad visitors failed to notice the difference between the copy and the famous original (which, by the way, is permanently exhibited in the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, just a couple of miles away). It was only in 1992–93, following a wave of public uproar from Israeli and Jewish-American feminists that the fiasco was exposed. According to an explanation disclosed to the press quite inadvertently, one of the museum's curators admitted that the women were made to disappear "in order to lay emphasis on the male figures at the front, and in order to focus on the men's devotion [*kavana*]." And as if to add insult to injury, another (woman) curator added: "Our Gottlieb is not an [ordinary] reproduction. . . . Our leading concept was to re-tell the story of Jewish creativity. . . . Aren't the main actors of the Yom Kippur worship men? This is a fact. . . . It is men who represent the archetypal Jew. . . . The women in this picture do not serve the concept."⁷ Fearing the reaction of donors, the museum eventually decided to exile the copy to a side room, where it has been stored and shrouded to this day.

These two examples of marginalization and erasure capture the ways in which traditional patterns still reverberate in Israeli culture. They also demonstrate how Israeli feminists make use of the past in their will to change the present.

"We cannot change the actual past," writes Daniel Boyarin. "We can only change the present and the future, in part by changing our understanding of the past."⁸ In appropriating the medieval texts to feminist criticism, I am aware of my use of a two-edged sword pointing simultaneously to the past and the present. This stance raises a host of questions. Does a feminist reader have the right to approach an old text with new questions? Can one critique a past culture for reflecting and disseminating social views deemed oppressive to the modern eye? How can a woman/feminist reader partake in a heritage that had excluded her kind? Should such a textual tradition be discarded altogether, or can it be transformed into leverage for change? Can the past be usable for present concerns, and how?

Questions of this sort inevitably haunt writers who revisit the past. Medievalist Paul Zumthor states: "The ultimate term we aim for is really to bring the ancient text into the present, that is to integrate it into that historicity which is ours. The pitfall is that in doing so we may deny or obscure its own historicity; we may foreshorten the historical perspective

and, by giving an achronic shape to the past, hide the specific traits of the present.”⁹ Understanding the past “other” and anchoring him/her in its historicity is also Boyarin’s advice to readers of the talmudic texts that he explores. Partaking in a cultural heritage which is “ours and not ours” involves an intricate perspective. And if this culture does not offer positive figures for women’s empowerment, then, says Boyarin, the reader has to search for loci of difference and dissent within the ancient male texts (rather than viewing them as monoliths) and to ally with past voices that undermined hegemony. His proposition for an “anthropological ethics” requires one “to avoid assuming a position of cultural superiority from which to judge or blame the [past] ‘Other.’”¹⁰ Yet a critique of this ancient culture is unavoidable where it is still influential in producing gender practices unacceptable to us.

In the case of medieval Hebrew literature, where the reader cannot avoid rejection of and resistance to misogynistic texts, studying it “as if business were usual became an embarrassment.”¹¹ Such attitudes of opposition and resistance can become, paradoxically, ways of participating in and belonging to the past heritage. Moreover, as Elaine Tuttle Hansen asserts, feminist criticism of the medieval canon can serve as a paradigm for the feminist critic in general. It can do so since it “offers a place in which to examine the risks and benefits of critiquing hegemonic discourses and masterworks from a position of exclusion, and to analyze the limits and powers of being constructed, as feminisms are constructed, in opposition to (rather than outside or beyond) the structures they seek to modify.”¹²

Furthermore, through a feminist reading of medieval texts, the canon can be reclaimed not only for the feminist critic but also for modern readers in general. An old text can thus be salvaged from its oblivious past and made meaningful to new readers who confront it with new questions. “The tradition of art,” states Hans Robert Jauss, “presupposes a dialogue between the present and the past, according to which a past work cannot answer and speak to us until a present observer has posed the question which returns it from its retirement.”¹³ During my not-so-short classroom experience I have witnessed how gender issues have animated the discussion and rendered medieval texts accessible and relevant to otherwise disinterested students. Significant disputes over religious, ideological, and practical issues of gender in modern Judaism attain more depth and validity when posed against the historical perspective of the Jewish textual heritage. In deliberately appropriating a historical work to present-

day critical discourse, an old text can be made “a field on which currently interesting battles can be waged (and where a number of live mines . . . can be expected to blow up).”¹⁴

The chapters of this book vary in scope. Some attend to a theme or a genre, others examine a single work. Though not initially meant to methodically cover any generic typology or historical evolution, my chapters do roughly follow a certain generic and historical order. The early chapters discuss Andalusian-Hebrew poetry (eleventh and twelfth centuries), while the latter treat the prose forms cultivated in Christian Spain, Italy, and Provence (thirteenth and fourteenth centuries).

Chapter 1 (“No-Woman’s-Land”) deals with exclusion of Jewish women from the Hebrew “republic of letters.” It also maintains that the androcentric nature of medieval Hebrew literature was to be reproduced by modern scholarship. Hence, various critical feminist strategies are considered in this chapter, by which representations of women, their presence in or absence from medieval Hebrew literature, can be described and assessed. While viewing the gallery of feminine images appearing in the writings of medieval Hebrew authors, and while listing the literary genres in which these images feature, the chapter also furnishes a brief overview of medieval Hebrew poetry (especially in Spain).

In Chapter 2 (“Gazing at the Gazelle”), I attempt to deconstruct some of the androcentric assumptions which underlie the male love lyric and which are concealed under the guise of love and admiration for the lady. In these poems the lady speaks through her silence. Silencing her is controlling her dangerous attraction. On the other hand, it is her mutinous muteness, perceived as passive resistance, which provokes the lover/poet and engenders his amatory speech. In unmasking the mannerisms of the tireless poet-suitors; in exposing “love” as a linguistic affair, as a power game in which the lover endeavors to subjugate the lady-of-hearts, in calling the bluff of the “feminized” lover and the “masculinized” beloved, I propose to unearth the sexual politics embedded in the love lyric. Making use of Freud’s and Lacan’s analyses of romantic love, as well as of post-modern theories of the gaze, I offer to deconstruct the gendered aspects of “love” hidden in the literary conventions of the poets. And, in reading the love poems against the grain, I suggest that the mute lady, when rebuffing the poet’s florid wooing, is herself a resistant reader of male texts. The defiant lady inscribes the space for the discourse of the future feminist reader. Additionally, I reflect on the woman reader’s response to the

aesthetics of these poems. Is she not tempted by their beauty and erotic appeal? Or, if she resists their politics—will she still be able to enjoy their elegance?

Chapter 3 (“Veils and Wiles: Poetry as Woman”) investigates the gendered *ars poetica* that underlies the poets’ art. The best of poetry, like the best of women, is said to be beautiful and deceitful. Poetic speech and female speech both abuse language and veil the truth. Poetry and rhetoric, both empty and superficial, are thus considered, like women, the opposite of truth and the foes of the male philosopher. Such antipoetry utterances, I argue, have to be seen against the historical influence of Maimonides’ misogynist ideas. Maimonides’ ideas on poetry and on women, which are intrinsically and mutually related, advanced greatly the aversion toward poetry, even among the poets themselves, from the thirteenth century onward. Misogyny and misopoiesis are shown to be twin fruits of the same branch.

While the equation of Poetry as Woman was essentially effected by Aristotelian-Maimonidean misogynist ideas, the association of Soul and Woman, investigated in Chapter 4 (“Poor Soul, Pure Soul”), is basically Neoplatonic. Here I examine the ideological assumptions of the allegory of the human Soul when she is figured as Woman. Her shifting ontological positioning (*vis-à-vis* God, the human self, the Intellect, and the body) is allegorically cast in a variety of human relationships. The ambiguous symbolism of the female soul—being inferior and subjugated on the one hand, and being an agent of free choice and liberation (salvation) on the other—becomes a critical locus where the feminist reader can enter and rework the traditional binarisms.

Chapter 5 (“Domesticating the Enemy”) is dedicated to the analysis of a single work. This is “The Offering of Judah the Misogynist,” a narrative which provoked a continued literary debate between Jewish women-haters and women-lovers in Christian Spain and Provence throughout the thirteenth century. Its story line follows the adventures of an avowed bachelor and professional antifeminist, who, in his fierce objection to marriage, practically spells out all the notorious and much-recycled misogynous and misogynist stuff. The misogynist accusation of woman’s big mouth is thematized in the garrulous spouse who opens her bottomless mouth in endless complaint and reproach. The story’s ideological ambivalence toward marriage, together with its narrative strategies of ambiguity and dramatic irony, render marriage as an unsolved existential predicament for men. I offer to read this bizarre Jewish misogynous

work (and the literary debate that it incited) as concurrent with conflicting views about marriage among Jewish intellectuals, and against the background of the struggle between the Catholics and the Cathars in the early thirteenth century.

Common to my treatment of all *maqāmāt* by al-Ḥarizi and Immanuel of Rome studied in Chapter 6 (“Among Men: Homotextuality in the *Maqāma*”) is the attention to the texts’ own reflection upon the gendered conditions of their production. Male speech is shown to be a rhetorical sport in which woman is positioned as object—topic, prize, wager. In one *maqāma*, fashioned extraordinarily as a rhetorical debate between “a man” and “a woman,” a woman’s voice, clear and assertive, objects to its silencing, claims its right of speech, and refutes one by one men’s assumptions of her inferiority. But even when woman is made to speak, she still occupies an ambivalent locus—that of a capable advocate of woman-kind and that of an object, an abstraction endowed with the right of speech. A harbinger of the feminist resisting reader inscribed into the text, this woman counterbalances her male partner in theology and in sophistry. Hence, she becomes an implied critic of patriarchy in a text devised by a man to make other men laugh. Why would the author who argues for man’s superiority lend a mouth to a female voice? Why would a male text dispute itself and subvert its own privilege?

The cultural signification of cross-dressing is the topic of Chapter 7 (“Clothes Reading”). In the four stories studied here, cross-dressing plays a vital axis in the dramatic plot. Transvestism is read as a laboratory where questions of gender boundaries, sexual binarism, and the constructedness of gender are explored. The assumption that the transvestic theme, signifying gender anxiety, might also be read as a sign of other—ethnic, cultural, literary—anxieties is investigated throughout the chapter. It is suggested that the historical signification of the theme may relate to the changing intercultural situation of Spanish-Hebrew authors in the thirteenth century and to the anxieties these changes exerted.

Moving from transvestism to transsexuality, Chapter 8 (“Circumcised Cinderella”) deals with a unique prayer to God by a male who wishes to be transsexed. What is actually transformed in the text, however, is the grammatical gender of the speaker. While he is complaining about the hardships of being a male, his voice suddenly transforms into that of a fantasized woman. This changing and merging of voices yields a specular perspective in which man and woman see themselves and each other. It also enables a most peculiar and subversive critique of the cultural

construction of Jewish gender—of femininity as well as of masculinity. Written concurrently with the “invention” of the woman’s blessing (“Blessed art Thou . . . who hast made me according to His will”), this piece by Qalonymos might be considered the first historical comment on that blessing.

It is my hope that this book will make a contribution to the fields of Jewish studies and Hebrew literature and, at the same time, also to scholars of medieval European literatures. In my translations¹⁵ throughout the book, from Hebrew poetry and prose, I aimed at making medieval Hebrew writings accessible and helpful to other medievalists. I intended in particular to acquaint feminist medievalists with gender trouble in yet another classical literature of that era.